

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ROBERT S. McNAMARA
INTERVIEW WITH SAUL PETT IN THE BALTIMORE SUN
APRIL 7, 1963

'EMOTIONLESS MACHINE POWERED BY REASON'

He sat behind the big, 9-foot desk once used by Gen. John J. Pershing. On the wall behind him hung a portrait of James Forrestal, the first secretary of defense, a public man who took his life in an agony of private terror.

Robert McNamara, the eighth secretary of defense, rose slowly, his eyes still trailing over the desk in a frown of concentration. Satisfied there was nothing else, he finally looked up and it was clearly a terminal point. He visibly got out of his working frown and into a relaxed friendly smile and shook hands.

Most men have to shift emotional gears after a working day but in McNamara's case the change is spectacular. There are those who say he switches back to warm humanity from an emotionless machine powered only by cold reason, rigid purpose and roaring confidence.

"Tough day?"

"No tougher than most," he said matter of factly.

Tough or medium-tough, the day was over, barring sudden crisis. It was now 8 p.m. and most of the Pentagon was dark as the boss was leaving after a 13-hour day. Outside, across the river, light glowed from the Washington Monument and the Capitol dome, an easy howitzer shot away. The evening's serenity belied the growing war between McNamara and his critics, over the TFX contract to General Dynamics, over charges that he has muzzled and ignored our military professionals to become a civilian dictator of defense.

Inside the office, silence cradled the four phones by which McNamara can reach around the world immediately, from his wife at home to the President in the White House (who said recently that the country is lucky to have a man of McNamara's courage and decisiveness), to the most secret war rooms of our military complex, to the most distant theater commanders.

On the desk, the out-box was full. The four in-boxes were empty and one had the feeling of a fulsome stream suddenly cut off from "for signature," "action items other than signature," "cables" and "reading materials."

I work twelve to fourteen hours a day to be informed, to make decisions based on knowledge, on fact, not emotion. Having examined the alternatives, I have no hesitancy in making a decision. Once made, it doesn't worry me. It's the problem of finding the right approach to an objective that worries me, that keeps me awake and makes me irritable at home.

Productive Result

One thinks always in terms of objectives-to respond to continuing pressure from the Soviets, to be prepared to respond. This is an intellectual as well as a moral challenge.

I think about the terror and how to minimize the danger and maximize our opportunities. Beyond that, one cannot allow fears of nuclear arms to lead to paralysis of action. Worry without productive result is simply a waste of resource.

The Secretary of Defense recently told a congressional committee that if the United States and Russia ever fired all their nuclear weapons at each other, the resultant death toll would probably approach 300,000,000. Does the man who has to know this and say this, does he ever find himself dreaming of a big mushroom cloud?

Never. But I do recall vividly that Saturday night, October 27, in the week of the Cuban crisis, when I was driving from the White House back to the Pentagon. It was a time when we were waiting for the Russian response, when the quarantine was a week old, when we had a huge invasion force poised.

It was a lovely soft evening with a beautiful sunset and I found myself thinking this might be the last evening I and the other people on the streets might ever see such a sunset again.

One had the feeling of momentous events propelling us forward. This was the deepest sadness I ever felt, for fear the Soviets would fail to realize the consequences of their actions.

'Most Satisfying Week'

Having allowed himself the memory of emotion, Robert McNamara paused over his coffee cup, shook off the feeling, and returned to his diet of reason.

In other ways, the week of the Cuban crisis was the most satisfying week I've ever had in Government. The responsible leaders worked closely and effectively, exchanging views, arriving at independent conclusions, considering alternatives, making a decision.

Throughout it all, the President supplied the intellectual and moral leadership. He was the coolest and most perceptive man in Government at the time. And the result was a triumph of reasonable men.

We told the Secretary about a highly placed senior officer in the Pentagon who admires him. The officer had told us that "McNamara" "always" seeks military advice and "almost always" follows it; that he has a brilliant, original mind; that he has supplied decisive leadership in an office which lacked it too often in the past.

One Weakness

"But," said the officer, "McNamara has one weakness, in his dealings with Congress. He is right 99 per cent of the time and being right that often inevitably produces resentment. But even in the few times when he's wrong, he hates to admit it. He'd be better off if he did, especially in his relations with Congress."

At the dinner table, McNamara considered this appraisal. His first reaction was:

"I'd have to ask that man when he thought I was wrong. Then I'd have to examine that situation and analyze it and come to a conclusion."

His second reaction was: "Of course, like anybody else I'm wrong many times and I have no difficulty admitting it."

It was the first reaction one remembered. As we closed out the evening in the restaurant we left with the impression that Robert McNamara finds it difficult to be wrong not because being right all the time is so crucial to his ego; but because being wrong could shake his view of the world, as seen through the classic architecture of reason.